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National Music

Alan Riach (Friday 27 May 2016)

When Hugh MacDiarmid wrote his series of articles *Contemporary Scottish Studies* for the *Scottish Educational Journal* in the 1920s, he addressed seven specific subjects: literature, language, literary and cultural criticism, music, art, historiography, and education. In this series of articles for *The National*, I've been concerned so far principally with literature and painting, so there's still plenty to talk about. But I should emphasise that for me, the core of it is threefold: (1) poetry and literature, (2) paintings, sculpture and architecture and (3) music. Maybe music is the most important thing of all, encompassing everything, but thankfully we're talking here about a world where there is no need for competition, only an unencompassable and ever-changing treasury, a true currency. The question is how to use it well. So, following from that, I'd keep in mind three other areas of vital concern: (4) performance, which includes concerts, plays, dance, ballet, song (and sport), (5) newspapers, radio, TV, film and other media, all forms of public communication, and (6) institutions of education, including libraries, galleries and museums. Fundamental to all these is (7) methodology: how to, rather than what to. These seven areas of activity in the nation are always in need of review, investment and revitalisation. All health depends upon them. Which reminds me of Ezra Pound's essay, *How to Read* (1929) and his little book, *ABC of Reading* (1934), both of which are essential, and for all that you'd want to disagree with, stay packed with good advice.

So far, so "universal" but things do change and can be changed, which is why *The National* exists. Other examples help. After 1945, the artistic capital of the world moved, or was moved, from Paris to New York. There were commercial and political interests in that as well as aesthetic ones. Concentrated effort by artists, museum directors and government to promote and disseminate American art and culture began seriously at that time, taking on an extra urgency because of the Cold War. For composer/conductor Leonard Bernstein, a left-leaning liberal, the first native-born principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic, the issue was about American music and not primarily the defeat of communism.

As well as placing a large portrait of George Washington in the foyer of Lincoln Centre, Bernstein programmed a work by an American composer in every concert during his first season. "My job is an educational mission" he told the *New York Times* a few weeks after his

appointment. The coming season was to be “a general survey of American music from the earliest generation of American composers to the present.” That opening season, 1958-59, was a turning point in the musical and cultural life of America.

In the 1970s, at concerts by the NY Phil, you would see an American Flag on the stage beside the orchestra. Its very presence was saying: “We’re an American orchestra! This is the best of America!” There are some who would recoil in horror at such chauvinism, but it’s a far cry from Mr Trump, and there are times when it’s right and proper to make such a point confirming cultural identity and self-confidence. And times when it’s wrong. It happens regularly in London on the last night of the proms. The Elgar hijack.

So what if the flag were the Saltire?

James MacMillan may be hostile towards Scottish independence, but he is committed to a project similar to the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra and the Big Noise orchestra programme in Raploch, by Stirling, working with the national charity Sistema Scotland, based on the methods and practices of Venezuela’s El Sistema movement. This involves school children having fun and getting involved in performing and learning about classical orchestral music. That’s terrific. Recently, educationalists have emphasised that for children, music education and playing should be paramount in early learning. Playing is of far greater value than league tables and tests. The letters in *The National* of May 16 (“A step change in education needs a radical rethink”) say so, and why. But in Scotland, this needs complementary work in concert programmes and adult exposure to classical music by Scottish composers of a wide range across centuries, because a lot of great Scottish music simply isn’t in the repertoire.

A Culture Minister might take the initiative here. Think of a Scottish conductor/composer, a Scottish professional orchestra, getting together to do what Bernstein did in America: a general survey of Scottish classical music, embedded in the repertoire and explored sensitively, thoughtfully, over time: Robert Carver, John Clerk, Thomas Erskine, Alexander Campbell Mackenzie, Hamish MacCunn, John Blackwood McEwen, Frederic Lamond, Cecil Coles, F.G. Scott, Erik Chisholm, Ronald Center. There is much more than MacCunn’s “Land of the Mountain and the Flood” (excellent as it is). And there is an evident want for it. In 1992, the Edinburgh International Festival put on a series of concerts of Scottish music, covering a very wide range and ending with Mackenzie’s *Scottish Concerto* which was received with wild applause. Something similar could be done every five years, at least.

In Scotland, there is a great champion of Scotland's music in John Purser. He broke open new ground, whole territories of enquiry and enjoyment, for the widest possible range of people, with his radio programmes, books, and his encouragement of new recordings of Scotland's music – from Bronze Age horns to full-scale major orchestral works from the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly. The first radio series in 1992 comprised thirty 90-minute programmes broadcast every Sunday afternoon, with a double CD selection from it and an illustrated book with an extensive discography. There was a revised series of fifty 30-minute programmes and a revised edition of the book with an extended discography in 2007. The books are currently out of print and the radio programmes difficult to find outside of the Scottish Music Centre, Candleriggs, Glasgow. They should be in every school in the country, and in use.

So much of the material has still to be brought into practice. Much of it, I imagine, is simply written off as negligible because it's Scottish. Yet literature and music and all the arts arise from the nation in which they are imagined and created. This is certainly the case with English music, especially at the start of the 20th century. Elgar was an inspiration from whom Vaughan Williams would learn, but do different things; Vaughan Williams himself had that role for Benjamin Britten. But the depth and character of their music, and its practice, is English. I love it. And maybe Vaughan Williams most.

It may seem paradoxical to introduce Scottish composers with reference to the writings of a pre-eminently English composer but it's salutary to consider how national history and aspects of character apply in other countries, and England is our neighbour, and English art and music has a significant bearing here. Vaughan Williams more than any of the three great modern English composers talks about this in his book, *National Music and Other Essays* (1963), where he says that "the musical style of a nation" arises from the vernacular in poetry and the character of its speech. Therefore, he warns, "English musical history is full of the tragedy of genius withering on barren soil... Many young British composers have been ruined by abdicating their birthright in their most impressionable years. Before they knew what they wanted to achieve, before they had learned, so to speak, their own language, they went to Paris or Berlin or Vienna and came back having forgotten their own musical tongue and with only a superficial smattering of any other."

Now, Vaughan Williams himself went to Paris and studied under Ravel, but that was where he discovered his essential English character – in the same way, a little earlier, that

JD Fergusson went to Paris and discovered his essential Scottish character. (We talked about this in *The National* on March 18). After travelling to France, they both returned to see anew and deeply the national languages each wanted to reaffirm and regenerate in their different arts.

The status of the arts is connected with the status of the nation in which they arise. An independent nation has its own independent arts, and this is seen clearly internationally. Ireland is a good example. Irish literature has an international status quite different from that of Scottish literature, although that has been changing because of the enormous range and the quality of critical and scholarly work that has been done and continues to be done on Scottish literature.

And it's just as true of England. Vaughan Williams again: "When Stravinsky writes for the chorus his mind must surely turn homeward to his native Russia with its choral songs and dances and the great liturgies of its church." He suggests that Stravinsky's "Les Noces" and the "Symphony of Psalms" will remain fresh and alive because of that Russian depth of attachment. He also notes this: "Smetana, the recognized pioneer of Czech musical nationalism, received his first impulse from 1848, the year of revolution, when he wrote his choruses for the revolutionary National Guards."

Vaughan Williams is scathing about the "misguided thinker" who described music as "the universal language" when even the most "universal musician", Johann Sebastian Bach, built up all his work "on two great foundations, the organ music of his Teutonic predecessors and the popular hymn-tunes of his own people": "I am quite prepared for the objection that nationalism limits the scope of art, that what we want is the best, from wherever it comes. My objectors will probably quote Tennyson and tell me that 'We needs must love the highest when we see it' or Rossini, 'that they know only two kinds of music, good and bad.'"

No, Vaughan Williams insists: "It is because Palestrina and Verdi are essentially Italian and because Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner are essentially German that their message transcends their frontiers." He quotes Dr HC Colles: "A people's music grows in contact with the people's mother tongue, from the emergence of the vernacular in poetry and prose literature speech stamps its character with increasing decisiveness in the name of the music of that people." Vaughan Williams comments: "The roots of our language and

therefore of our musical culture are the same, but the tree that has grown from those roots is not the same.”

It’s just as true of writing. It’s certainly true of all the major Scottish writers, from Dunbar to Duncan Ban MacIntyre, from Elizabeth Melville to Fergusson and Burns, from Violet Jacob and Hugh MacDiarmid and William Soutar to Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay.

Democracy educates and education democratises. Otherwise, both fail. Anyone who has been deeply engaged in the works of great artists is changed by that experience, because great art has things that matter to give us. All great art is on the side of humanity. The ideals of democracy in the social structures that give access to the arts must be effected for the arts to realise that gift, and for people to receive it.

And this is keyed to national identity, in two respects. One is what rises from people, like water in the well; the other is what the state can do to help that nourishment circulate freely, in educational egalitarianism. This is why James MacMillan’s work in Raploch has to be supported, and needs to be extended, nationwide.

Vaughan Williams again: “Mozart and Beethoven [were] nationalists just as much as Dvorak and Greig.” He speaks of himself as benefiting from Cecil Sharp’s “epoch-making discovery of English folk-song” thus aligning his own music with a rediscovered and regenerated English nationalism. Within this nationalist flourishing of rediscovered traditions, Vaughan Williams says, when you are talking of difficult work, the democratic purpose of your address to all people may be enhanced, if you talk to people with respect for their full humanity: “The people must not be written down to, they must be written up to. The triviality which is so fashionable among the intelligentsia of our modern musical polity is the worst of precious affectations. But the ordinary man expects from a serious composer serious music and will not be at all frightened even at a little ‘uplift’.”

This was at the heart of the development of an American idiom in poetry in the 20th century, from Walt Whitman to William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg. Williams shared Whitman’s belief, as written in the last sentence of the preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855): “the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.”

You could test that the other way, though: the proof of a country is that it absorbs its great poets as deeply as they have absorbed it. And by “poets” we mean artists, composers, sculptors, writers and “makars” of all kinds.

So the proof of Scotland as an independent nation will be its ability to honour by practice and knowledge all its arts and artists, and be open to, and learn from, all the best art and artists in the world, throughout history. And by “Scotland” here we mean the people of Scotland, the people who live here, the citizens of the nation, including all the people in government. We take our bearings from this place, opening out to the world.

So with that purpose in mind, the next three essays in this series will be written by John Purser, and focus on the triumvirate of great 19th- to 20th-century composers, Alexander Campbell Mackenzie, Hamish MacCunn and John Blackwood McEwen.

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We are apt to look on art and music as a commodity and a luxury commodity at that; but music is something more – it is a spiritual necessity. [It] cannot be treated like cigars or wine, as a mere commodity. It has its spiritual value as well. It shares in preserving the identity of soul of the individual and of the nation.

Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays* (1963)